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Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Housing

The City of Boston
Raymond L. Flynn, Mayor

Public Facilities Department
Lisa G. Chapnick, Director

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PROJECT
747





CITY OF BOSTON • MASSACHUSETTS

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
RAYMOND L. FLYNN

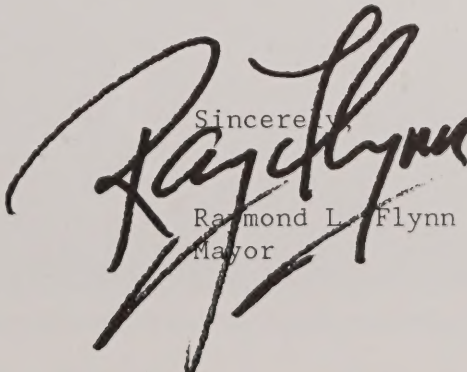
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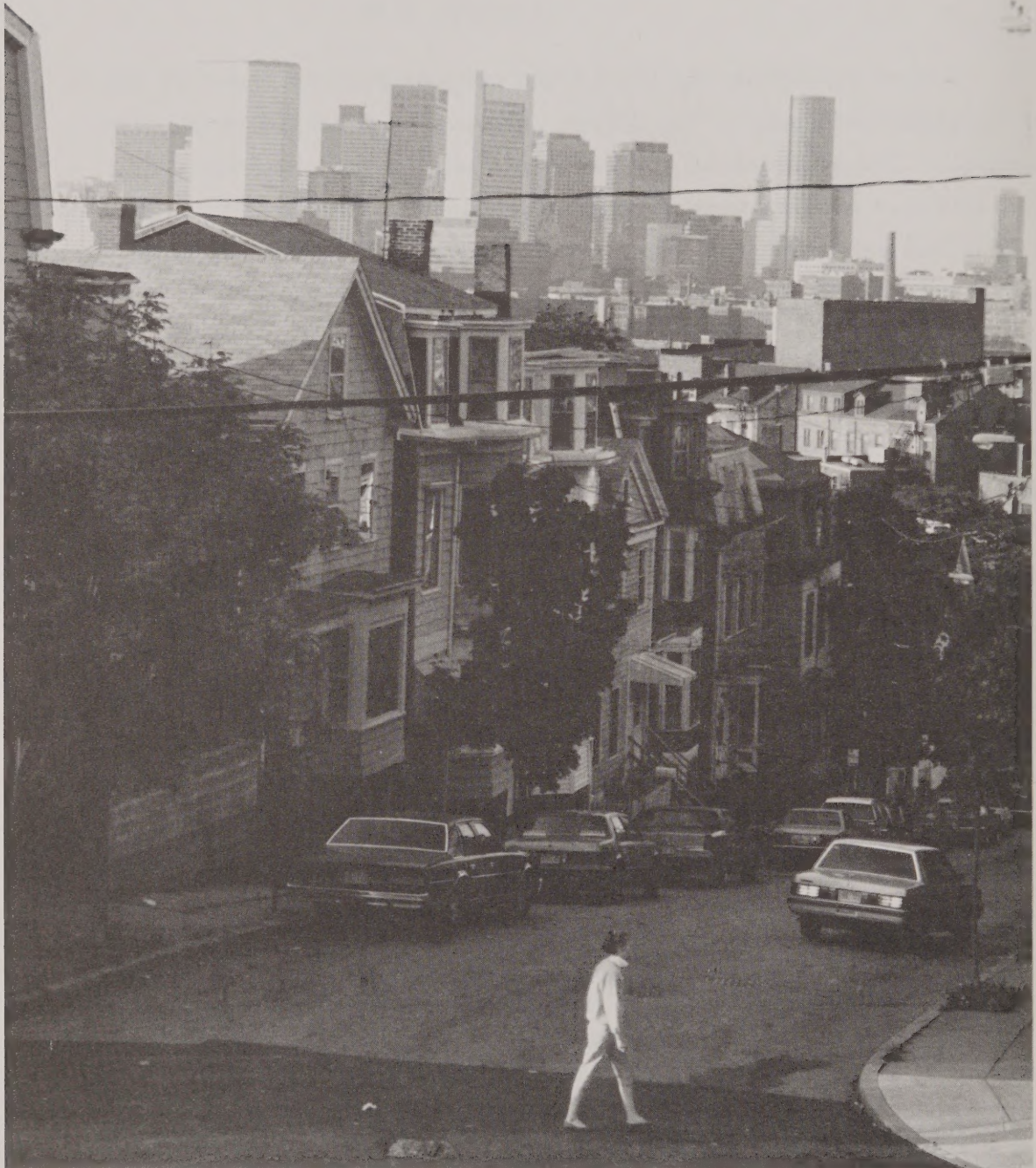
I want to express my thanks and appreciation to those of you in the neighborhoods and in the design community who helped shape this document. The opinions of the residents who live in recently-built, city-assisted housing were particularly helpful. The result of this input is that the enclosed guidelines provide a clear set of goals and objectives for Project 747.

Project 747 is an ambitious initiative--to transform all of the City's vacant, buildable lots into solid and attractive housing. These guidelines underscore the importance of building homes that fit in with the surrounding community. They also speak to critical issues such as security, parking and landscaping. Ultimately, these guidelines will help ensure that quality housing of which we can all be proud will be built.

I am confident that with your help--as residents, architects, contractors, developers, and non-profit builders--we will improve the face of Boston's neighborhoods and provide greater opportunities for affordable homeownership.

I welcome your participation in this important and exciting undertaking.

Sincerely,

Raymond L. Flynn
Mayor



2 A view from Dorchester Heights in South Boston looking towards the downtown.

PROJECT 747

OVERVIEW

On July 25, 1987, Mayor Flynn made a commitment to the people of Boston to take action on all city-owned buildable land by 1991. Project 747 meets that promise. It designates 747 vacant lots as new sites for affordable housing.

For many years, vacant land and abandoned buildings-- acquired by the city through tax foreclosure--were sold at auction to the highest bidder. This system fueled property speculation and discouraged the production of new housing. In 1981, for example, 181 lots sold at auction yielded just three new units of housing for Boston.

Soon after taking office in 1984, Mayor Flynn ended the auction of city-owned property. He created the Property Disposition Committee to forge new practices in property disposition that would lead to the development of affordable housing.

The first target was boarded-up abandoned buildings. A clearinghouse was formed to collect and disseminate information on tax-delinquent properties. Programs were put in place to package financial and technical resources for the rehabilitation of these properties.

Today virtually all city-owned abandoned buildings have been publicly advertised and sold. More than 60 have already been renovated and have yielded more than 180 units of housing- 92% of them affordable to low and moderate income residents.

The next challenge is to reclaim another valuable neighborhood resource-- vacant land-- and turn it into additional affordable housing and other uses that improve neighborhood life.

The vast majority (82%) of the vacant land in the city is privately owned. Of the 2000 or so parcels owned by the city, only a fraction (747) are considered buildable (lots greater than 3500 square feet). Many of the smaller parcels will be sold to next door home-owners for use as gardens, driveways, or additions to existing homes. Other small lots will be turned over to community groups, churches and neighborhood associations for use as playgrounds or gardens, or to serve other needs.

The 747 buildable lots present a unique opportunity for the construction of new, primarily one-to-four family homes in the city's neighborhoods. The program also provides an opportunity for small scale builders, churches, unions, non-profits, and developers to participate in Boston's revitalization. This initiative represents another blow to neighborhood blight, a resurgence of community pride, and most importantly an expansion of much-needed family housing.



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PROJECT
747

Introduction and Objectives



3 Homes are a cherished resource and people go to great lengths to preserve, maintain and reuse them.

This report sets forth guidelines for the development of well-designed housing in the neighborhoods of Boston. It is intended for a wide audience including real estate entrepreneurs, architects, community leaders, local development organizations, and neighbors.

The specific objectives of the report are:

1. *To promote good and innovative design in the residential development of city surplus land, and in projects funded with public subsidies;*
2. *To increase the awareness of design considerations among the citizens of Boston;*
3. *To provide clear rules for those embarking on the planning and design of residential projects.*

These guidelines should be studied at the beginning of the planning process and are intended to make people aware of design issues that warrant early consideration. The guidelines are presented as a check list from which to work. The text explains each guideline, while the pictures stand for thousands of words to make things clearer and more enjoyable.

In planning for a new residential development, it is important to incorporate many viewpoints. Ironically, the people ultimately most affected by this whole process--those who will eventually live in the residences--have the least amount to say at this most critical of times. Therefore, this report attempts to anticipate the residents' needs. Other voices are also absent during early planning: advocates for the environment and for future generations. Lastly, these guidelines are grounded in the practical, so they may be equally useful to the design professional, to the developer, and to public officials.

All sites have unique characteristics that defy categorization. We can not overemphasize the importance of visiting the site often. Visit the site at different times of day and if possible at different times of the year. Good, responsive design takes into account its own time and place. We have attempted to tailor the criteria to the problems faced by development in Boston.

We have tried to create guidelines that are concerned with objective and, as often as possible, self-evident criteria for improving the quality of residential development. To this end we have relied on a wide variety of source material. We encourage readers to review the bibliography for further information.

CHAPTER I

The Neighborhood



4 A typical street scene in a Boston neighborhood.

A neighborhood is an extraordinarily complex system full of interdependent elements. As a part of the city, it responds to a variety of forces acting on it in an evolutionary way. If we change one aspect of the local context it is likely that other aspects of the neighborhood will change as well. It is sometimes difficult to predict how the neighborhood will react to any given influx or influence, but a careful examination of the 'patterns' of a local context will give us some clue as to what may be successful.

We can take some comfort in the fact that in the past other people have come to terms with the same problems. What we see around us, although it may appear worn, was once the new result of well-intentioned efforts. Established patterns can tell us much of what we need to know about how to lay out the site. This is not to preclude invention or unique expression. These are necessary to make the city more interesting, and to come up with solutions tailored to the problems specific to a site.

An analysis of a neighborhood is by no means limited to the buildings. Such things as the micro-economics of the area or its history must be studied. A trip to the library and talks with residents can give you a good idea about what makes this neighborhood unique. These physical and social qualities are among the resources of the site.

The Neighboring Character and Tradition

1. Reinforce the existing neighborhood character and the traditional patterns of buildings and open space.

"I think that they look great - they are reminiscent of the triple-deckers, not in height but in style."

"The overhangs and the little awnings over the porches really make an effort to model after the existing housing stock -- pretty good attempt at making them fit in." (abutter)

In Boston, neighborhood character is an asset and often a point of pride for the residents. Character is the overall sense of a place. Ultimately the best measure of conformance to the given character of a place is a feeling that something fits and seems appropriate. The size and shape of buildings, or the location of the front door, contribute to the uniqueness of an area. The relationship of the door to a street, yard, or porch helps define a local character. The landscape and the building materials in the neighborhood are also important elements to observe in matching new development to existing.

Local context and patterns are often referred to and addressed in this chapter, but the larger context of the city of Boston may also contribute to the decisions made in planning. In beginning to discern Boston's unique qualities it is useful to imagine the perspective of a visitor to the city. Clearly the bricks of downtown and the North End, the clapboards of Dorchester, Mattapan, and South Boston, and the granite and masonry of the South End and Back Bay contribute to our image of these neighborhoods. What would your development look like in a post card sent to friends in Montana, or in a National Geographic article on Boston? How would the caption read?



5 The texture and pattern of an indigenous building type- Boston's triple decker.



6 A grouping of two-family houses around a commons at Wellsety Park in Dorchester.



7 The elegant regularity of house and street in Boston's South End.

Scale, Density, and Height

2. Maintain neighborhood scale and density, and do not exceed the average height of neighborhood buildings.

"There are just too many units on too small an area for this neighborhood. We are mostly a neighborhood of small single families -- there are just too many people there for it to fit in well. " (abutter)

Cities and neighborhoods transform and grow over time. Sometimes the change is rapid and radical. But in the vast majority of cases, the change is slow and subtle, and should be so. New development should closely match the scale, density, and height of its neighbors.

The scale of the neighborhood around a site is defined by the relative size of one thing to another. Some examples of the relationships that should be studied include (but are not limited to) the following: the relative height of buildings to open spaces; the size of lawns, fences, and other aspects of the landscape in relation to the size of open spaces; the size of doors, windows, and exterior stairs, and their relationship to the wall; the relationship of all parts of a window to each other; the size of trim to the size of an opening, and even the size of the window pane to the size of the window opening.

An example of neighborhoods of different scales would be Bay Village and the Back Bay. Examples of neighborhoods of similar scales would be Allston/Brighton and South Boston. Scale can differ from street to street: on major arteries such as Commonwealth Avenue or Columbia Road, the scale is generally grander, while on secondary streets such as Marlborough Street in Back Bay, or Park Street in Dorchester, it is smaller and more intimate.

Density -the number of residences per given area - contributes to our sense of urbanism, distinguishing city living from suburban or rural habitation. Low density is not always a virtue. A city or neighborhood gains many of its positive qualities from being compact. Your challenge is to balance the need for parking, open space, light, air, and gardens with a development density that maintains a sense of close community.

It is the perceived density that is important. Building height is obviously a function of both the scale and density of a project. Matching the local pattern of height is an easy way to fit your project into the city. This is a good technique for helping a lower-density development fit into an area of higher density.

Like all edges in design, the top edge of a building is important. Towers, pinnacles, and the occasional punctuation of a building's roof line are desirable. A cornice line that is articulated adds visual interest to the silhouette of the street and knits the sky with the roofs of buildings.



8 A jarring scale change from residential to commercial development in a neighborhood near Boston.

3. Match the existing relationship of buildings to streets and public ways. Interlock new development with existing city fabric.

"I think the buildings all lined up are okay -- I wish they didn't look all alike."

The city can be understood as a collection of buildings which, by virtue of their placement and relationship to one another, establish coherence in the public realm. Such relationships are not casual. Holding the line of street to building so that a sense of continuity emerges between the street and the building face is a primary way to reinforce a common urban relationship. If this relationship is broken, discomfort results, as when a smile is marred by a missing tooth. Maintaining prevalent setbacks, front yards, and stoops is also important. The face of a building fronting on a public way is often different from the ones that are perpendicular to the street or the ones that face the back. Take care to match other existing relationships such as the the height of the first floor above the street, the size and placement of exterior stairs, or the presence of porches, ancillary structures, and street trees.

There is often a visible pattern to the streets on a city map. This grain of streets influences the way the city develops and is understood. Sustaining this grain in block size and street size can help a new development fit into the city.



9 A rhythm of stoops, bays, dormers, and even gutters enliven this otherwise ordinary streetscape.



10 An orderly street environment maintained by a system of trees, sidewalks, plantings, front doors and articulated entries



11 Unfortunately many recent housing developments ignore traditional street patterns and confuse the distinction between public and private spaces.

CHAPTER 2

The Site Proper



12 These vacant sites in the Franklin Field South Neighborhood are part of the 747 parcels to be developed.

Once general concerns have been established by balancing the demands for the use of the site with the dictates of the neighborhood patterns, the planning of the site can begin. As you make decisions about the use of open spaces, the issue of parking looms large. Not all parking lots have to be eyesores. It is important to consider this aspect of the planning problem from without and within the development. Here again observations of how current problems of parking are handled in the area can give clues as to how to structure or where to place your lots.

The edge of the development is one of the most important areas of the project and warrants special consideration. It is here that a face is presented to the surrounding neighborhoods. Poor planning in this regard can adversely affect the adjacent neighborhoods or give the project a bad image.

Amenities such as playgrounds, benches, and open spaces, located without consideration of how they will be maintained or supervised, rarely succeed. Plans should be made to prevent the general condition of the grounds from deteriorating. As a rule of thumb, each area of the site must have some kind of assigned use, and landscaping must be an intrinsic component of the overall site design.

Ogden Nash's remark that he had "never seen a billboard as lovely as a tree" most certainly holds true for site planning. We cannot overemphasize the power of the landscape to temper and soften even the most unfortunate decisions in site planning. A garden in the city should never be considered a luxury but rather a right of citizens. Vegetable gardening is the most popular hobby in America.

Most importantly, the development of a site must proceed with sound environmental planning principles. Consideration of topography, soil conditions, drainage, solar and wind orientation, and natural features will prevent choices that would be harmful to the land and detrimental to the development.

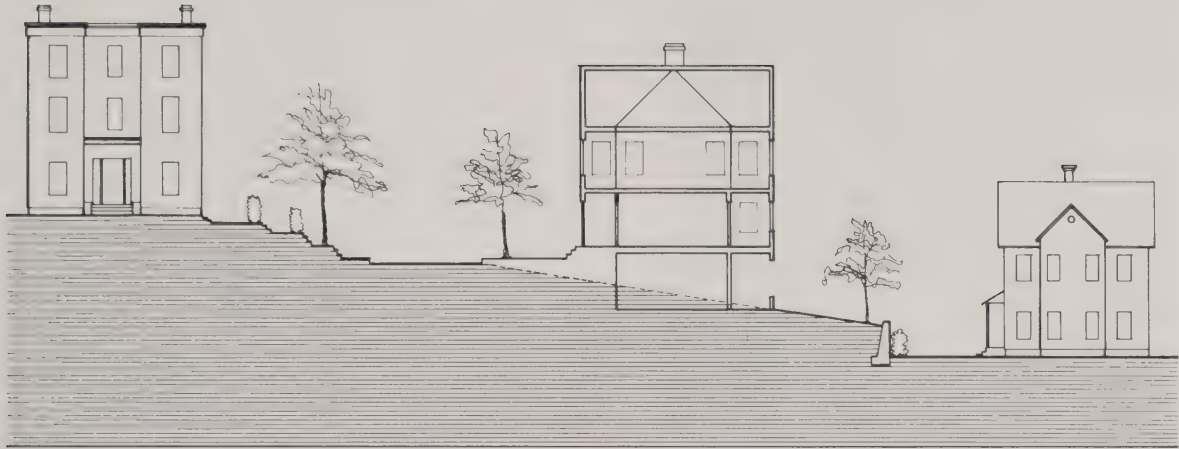
Responding to the Lay of the Land.

4. Respond to the site's environmental conditions and the lay of the land. Provide for adequate site drainage.

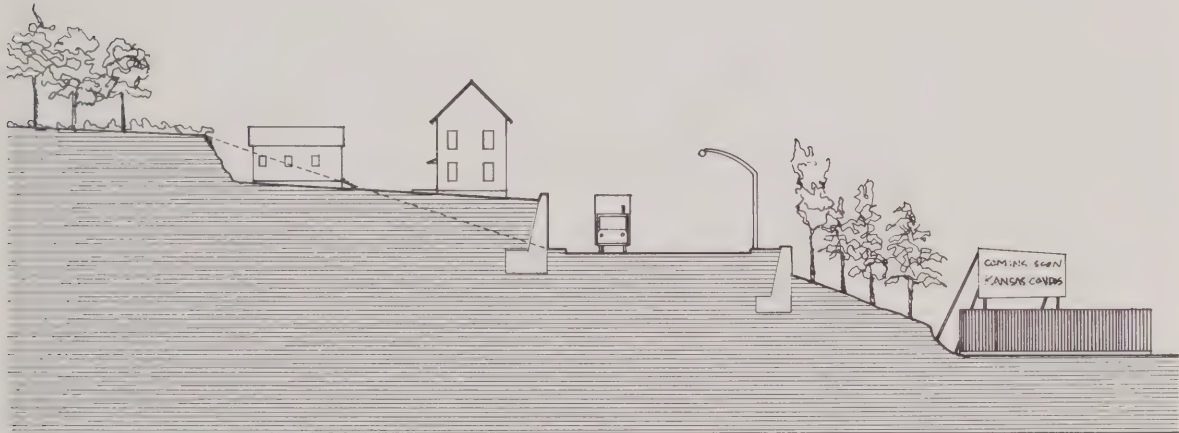
"Drainage problem. We are having the rear yard sealed with concrete because we have been told that this is the only way to deal with the water problem. Part of the problem is that we are here at the low end of the development -- all the water from up there comes down here. The drain doesn't seem to be in the right place. We haven't had grass in the rear yard since we moved in here -- it's a big mud puddle in the spring and fall."

Use the natural slope across the site. Major retaining walls and regrading are often unsightly and always expensive. The slope of your site may be one of the few things that remains to suggest what the area was like before the city grew around it. Dramatic changes in the grading will kill existing vegetation, disrupt drainage patterns, and adversely affect abutters.

Subsurface conditions can constrain a project even more than surface conditions. The type of soil, the presence of rock, and underground water channels will affect site planning. Some long-abandoned sites have been used as dumping grounds and may contain hazardous waste and old foundations. The city has recently launched a program to remove lead-contaminated soil from around old houses. This should illustrate the need to understand how seriously site conditions should be taken in planning a new development.



13 Use the natural lay of the land to your advantage. Working with the slope will save money and make for sensible development.



14 Detrimental aspects of building on a slope include the destruction of existing vegetation by cutting and filling, the expense of retaining walls and the adverse effects of an altered pattern of run-off.



15 Massive retaining walls often solve the problem of making severe slopes useable but tend to be over-scaled and unsightly for the pedestrian and his neighborhood.

5. Accomodate access and parking so the automobile, while conveniently situated, does not dominate the site.

The problem with the parking for our building is that it is over there away from the building - it's hard to get the groceries in and out."

"The cars are very safe as the parking is in the rear- we all watch out for each other's cars."

No one would argue with the proposition that the car is an important part of the American domestic landscape. It therefore deserves special consideration. People like to be able to see their car from their home and have it parked in a permanently assigned and nearby space. Some people spend their leisure time in and around their parked cars, maintaining them or sometimes just hanging out in them. In a housing quality survey, owner/ tenants cited poorly planned parking as one of the most annoying aspects of their development.

Much can be done to make parking lots better. Plan to put the lots behind buildings or to the side so that the lots do not dominate the site at the street. Even a modest parking lot can overwhelm the streetscape. Try to plan for many smaller lots rather than a few large ones. Break up the larger lots with periodic spaces devoted to shade trees. Try to minimize the width of curb cuts. Install devices to reduce driving speed through larger lots. Straight lanes in parking areas encourage speeding, while curves tend to slow traffic down. Lighting the parking lot at night should be accomplished with many smaller lights rather than few large ones--the smaller ones will be far less intense and more focused, cutting down on unwanted 'spill' light intruding into people's homes. Consider some options for paving: various colors and textures are available. Allow a well-drained area for piling up cleared snow, and be sure it can sustain the resulting melt. Snow collected from parking lots will be filled with salt, sand, and oil that can pollute the soil, and kill grass and other plants. Finally, remember to separate children's play areas from cars.



16 Large paved areas often collect dumpsters and rarely make for appealing environments.



17 Here shade trees, grass, and a fence do much to soften the visual impact of this parking lot.

Increasing Ground Related Activities

6. All open space should be assigned a specific function, or be assigned to a residential unit.

"I put this basketball hoop up so the kids could play together in the street -- it's good for them, and helps us as parents to get to know each other."

"Everybody thinks of all of the yard as common space -- that's part of the problem."

When each area of the site is assigned a specific use, it becomes clear who supervises or has a stake in its upkeep. If a group of residents care about an area, it tends to be maintained and looked after. Areas with no specific use tend to be subject to dispute and ultimately fall into disrepair and neglect.

Programming outdoor spaces for specific activities, such as gardening or play areas can enhance the quality of a development enormously, and at minimal expense. When assigning likely uses for various areas of the site, we should take a lesson from the early American furniture makers, the Shakers. In a wonderful demonstration of common sense they built every type of chair in seven different sizes, acknowledging that people come in various sizes and shapes. When considering site-related activities, do not neglect the size or age that people come in. It is possible to mix uses so that they complement each other: if benches and checker boards are close enough to play areas, then older people can supervise play. Remember that pathways will be used by young people as play areas; that sand boxes draw cats; and that water and mud will attract children better than expensive, educational play equipment ever will.

In larger developments, be careful in positioning sports activities. These functions create an obvious noise problem. Allow ample room around the play equipment and be sure that children are separated from traffic. Boston prides itself on the number of outdoor basketball facilities it has, and hence the quality of players these attract.

Think of the fixtures that are required around the site as the furniture of the outdoors. This will help you organize it effectively. Place seating areas where they make some sense: in the shade of a tree, or in groups facing each other, to allow for conversation or for larger groups to gather. Plan your scheme so that people can meet casually as they go about their daily rituals, but not in a way that makes them feel forced to interact. Elements such as gates, fences, hedges, and low walls imply privacy, but do not hinder the visibility of passers-by. Porches and stoops allow for casual socializing. Placing benches near sidewalks or paths can also encourage informal interaction.



18 Sturdy inexpensive play equipment sited away from cars should not be considered a luxury.



19 Children will always find their own play areas.

Open Space and Landscaping

7. Use native species of plants and durable landscape materials. Consider ease of maintenance. Wherever possible, an area for individual gardening should be set aside.

"I love the common space -- all the kids play together -- we have had two barbeques -- it really helps us all get along and build a sense of community."

The size and proportion of open spaces has a great deal to do with whether they are used or wasted. Huge open spaces are not always best. Smaller, more intimate spaces promote different types of activity and use by different groups of people. Provide a variety of sizes of outdoor open space.

Make a landscape plan as part of an overall site plan. Like buildings, the landscape should be designed. It is advisable to consult a professional landscape architect. Well-maintained grounds can add greatly to the quality of your development. As you lay out the landscape, pick plantings that will stand up to the traffic and the climate. Native species require less maintenance and are more likely to survive. Ease of maintenance and durability should also guide the selection of paving, seating, and other site materials.

Shade trees take up to twenty years to reach a useful size. Therefore, any existing trees are a valuable resource. Take precautions so that construction or regrading has no ill effects on the trees on or near the site. Retaining walls should be built around the trunks of existing trees if a change in grade is required. Care and some inconvenience during the construction phase will pay off greatly in the years ahead. Similarly, when planting new trees, an investment in relatively large trees (with trunks more than four inches in diameter) will result in less loss to vandalism, weather damage, and disease.

When it is impossible to furnish a sunny plot at each unit consider the use of the 'victory garden'. Garden space can be assigned to each tenant/owner in a multi-unit scheme. Gardens should be planned with a southern exposure and provided with a central water source.



20 Even a single bench could become an object of beauty and a welcoming place.



21 Increasingly becoming a luxury, a plot of land for gardening is always a welcome residential amenity.

CHAPTER 3

The Organization of the Residences



22 A neighborhood of triple deckers: one of Boston's most common housing types.

The buildings and the site should work together. In grouping the buildings, try to match existing densities and patterns. Avoid inflicting jarring and inappropriate scale changes. Odds are it will be impossible to match scale and patterns precisely, because of zoning or building codes, or because of budget. Remember that it is the perceived rather than the measurable density in groupings of buildings that will characterize development in the area.

The careful arrangement of units and clusters can make them safer. For example, by arranging units to permit passive surveillance by neighbors and omitting dead-ends and secluded areas a more secure development is created. Clarifying areas of public and private domains should be part of this effort, to prevent areas from falling into neglect, since people who identify with an area take better care of it .

Clearly, the buildings are important to the visual quality of the development, but so are the spaces between the buildings. These too should be carefully designed. By respecting existing views from a site, varying spaces between the buildings, and providing adequate private outdoor space, you can greatly improve the residents' experience in a development.

It is likely that the local neighborhood pattern is traditional in nature. Prioritize elements of the neighborhood that are important to the overall look, such as setbacks from the street, the width of streets, the location of trees and their variety, and the location of entrances in relationship to all of these above.

The city has developed in small increments, generally at the rate of one or two buildings at a time. Large numbers of units built at once overwhelm a neighborhood and lack the detail and charm of older construction. Vary the cluster size, alignments, and heights to give the sense of smaller units of buildings. All development will look awkward and out of place until its components begin to gain an individual character. Breaking up the line of buildings to express the individual units, while providing the opportunity for additions or alterations, will help your project to appear as an increment of growth in the city rather than an unwelcome invasion.

8. Provide the maximum sound control and visual separation between units, while reinforcing views and proper orientation.

"You can't have space which is assigned to each person if there is no fence around it -- it needs to be enclosed."

" Make it clear to everyone who owns what."

Establishing clear private and public domains is very important for indicating pedestrian routes, identifying common areas, and enabling individual families to have a personal "turf." A sense of well-being stems partly from being able to identify with one's own territory, inside and immediately outside a residence.

Acoustical and visual privacy are among the primary measures of the quality of a housing project. Noise outside the window and sometimes through the walls is a fact of urban life. No builder should be expected to completely eliminate sound transmission. However, you should try to separate likely areas of conflict: when laying out adjacent units, do not put bedrooms of one unit next to the living rooms of another. Where this is unavoidable, use a row of closet or storage space as a buffer between units. A dense row of clothing hanging up in a closet has good sound-deadening characteristics. Carpeting and other soft surfaces also help to cut down on noise. Jogs in corridors and even lightweight swinging doors across a corridor help address the noise problem, while stairways and elevators are noise generators.

Dense planting can help alleviate noise from external sources but may also create safety problems. It is more effective to build a physical barrier between the noise source and the living units but remember not to create secluded dead-ends. Building natural barriers such as berms will help to deflect and absorb noise.

The clusters of units should make way for existing views or create them. Strive for spaces between buildings that people will like to catch a glimpse of. A view is a great asset for a site. Obviously not all the units in a complex can share the view, so provide a public space where all tenants and owners can take advantage of it. Early modern architects often devoted whole roofs to gardens open to all the occupants of a building. In addition, there may be major public interior spaces that could be oriented towards the view. Frame the view whenever possible either between buildings or through specially placed windows. Respondants to numerous housing studies state that what they see out their windows has a great deal to do with how they feel about their surroundings.



23 People can become quite creative in personalizing their own domain.

9. Use natural surveillance to discourage crime. Entrances, parking, and pedestrian paths must be visible from inside units, and/or from the street.

"The kids all play in the front circle -- they like the tar because they can ride their bikes around -- it's better to have one place where they all play because they keep an eye on each other -- the big ones watch out for the little ones."

"The position of the units, facing each other, helps make the place safe."

The perception of a high crime area in fact engenders and encourages acts of crime. A new development can incorporate measures that reduce the potential for crime. On the other hand, outward and aggressive fortification can alienate neighbors or passers-by, and may even dare would-be criminals.

Self-policing or natural surveillance can do much to discourage crime. Natural surveillance means that no area of the project would be out of the normal day-to-day view of residents or passers-by. For example, alleys, poorly-lit paths, and areas under overpasses are traditionally viewed as dangerous precisely because they lack natural surveillance.

When looking at the plans for a proposed development, 'occupy' them by imagining what it would be like to walk around the development. Can the development be easily patrolled by the local police? Are all of the public outdoor spaces visible from the interior of dwellings? Are the entry ways, stairs, and elevator lobbies visible from the street or other active areas? Are outdoor areas and circulation paths well-lit at night? Are likely 'hang-out' spots themselves easily surveyed?



24 A common play area among dwellings helps create a sense of community.



25 A place from which to view the scene provides surveillance and often delight.

10. Incorporate materials and details characteristic of the neighborhood. Use durable, energy-efficient materials combined with sound construction practices.

"Latex paint instead of flat paint -- it's easier to keep the kids handprints off the walls, easier to keep clean."

"I wish the basements were finished, even if it cost us \$5,000 more. I would rather things be finished right and pay a little more."

The appearance of a development and its compatibility with neighboring buildings depends greatly on the choice of materials. Using materials not commonly found in the immediate surroundings will make the development stand out and appear jarring. Traditional Boston materials such as masonry and wood remain preferable because of their durability, texture, and well- established construction methods.

Materials in some sense have a life of their own. Be it brick, clapboard, or vinyl siding, there are logical, apt ways to use all materials. The late American architect Louis Kahn once said, "I asked the brick what it wanted to be and it said, "An arch." This is just to say that a given material has a way in which it works naturally. Advances in building technology constantly provide new and more practical materials. Even the often-scorned aluminum and vinyl siding can be used effectively and sensitively, when it is not used to simulate wood.

Expensive materials do not always make good buildings. More attention and resources should be allocated for making sure that the construction is well-detailed, of high quality, and imaginative. Inexpensive, durable and easy to maintain materials can be very elegant if used artfully. Architects are trained to provide such imaginative solutions. Paying for their creativity and experience can be far cheaper than paying for costly materials or poor planning.



26 The traditional use of materials helps to mesh new construction in an existing neighborhood.



27 Sound materials can only do so much to protect from decay. Good quality materials should be combined with regular maintenance.

CHAPTER 4

The Residence



28 A stately old residence overlooking Dorchester Bay.

A discussion of residential design would not be complete without looking at the individual residence. Ideally the site and home are interdependent, and thus should be considered together. Once again, examine the types of homes in the local neighborhood to see what kind of housing stock is needed or desirable. Architects have agreed that except for some common sense relationships (such as dining rooms adjacent to kitchens, and bathrooms close by to bedrooms) the house can be any shape at all and still function effectively. Just as a family adapts to the customs of a new neighborhood, so a new development of dwellings should conform to local patterns and precedents.

Shaping the individual unit is a way of looking at site planning from the inside out. The organization of the unit within the development as a whole, even the means of getting to it from the street or parking lot, will help determine the overall site plan. Similarly, all of the issues discussed in this final chapter--size and layout of the unit, orientation and sunlight, outdoor space and privacy, cross-ventilation, identification of entry--should influence the site layout. The unit designed only after all the site planning decisions have been made (Chapters 1-3) tends to be constrained and distorted. Conversely, beginning the process with a standard unit that cannot easily be altered may also lead to unimaginative or insensitive developments.

Less obvious concerns such as furniture-moving, the life of dogs, outdoor drying of laundry, and day care should also be kept in mind during the planning stages if they are to work well. Indeed all aspects of the domestic program stand to benefit from early attention in the design and planning.

11. Avoid a monotonous appearance by the use of color or other architectural elements. Anticipate the need for the residents to alter their units, or to personalize them.

"I'm glad we can build up or out back."

"I like how the buildings are staggered--they look good."

People take great pride in their homes. Any new housing development should strive hard to create an environment that its inhabitants will take pride in and call home. Most Americans still aspire to their own dwelling on its own plot of land. As this ideal becomes more difficult and costly to attain, more attention, not less, needs to be devoted to providing some of the advantages of individual dwellings within higher density, multi-family housing. These features include individual unit identity; distinguishable entry facing a public way; private outdoor space; and opportunities (even if modest) to alter the unit, so that an individual family can 'make its mark' and personalize its dwelling.

We can look to positive local examples such as the numerous two-, three-, and four-family houses built at the turn of the century, and especially to the three deckers, with their porches so easily adaptable by individual families. Such examples yield a great deal of insight into how to achieve a certain level of individuality and personalization. As simple a device as separate entries provides a sense of territory, identity, and home.



29 A two-family home that achieves a sense of identity for each of the two units.



30 A new triple decker design proposed for PFD's Buildable Lot program continues the traditional use of porches.



31 The use of wood siding and traditional roof forms helps to relate this proposed development on PFD land to the rest of Mattapan.

12. Unit size and layouts should emphasize efficiency and minimize circulation. Give the principal living areas character and detail. Be generous with storage areas.

"They did a good job with how the units look, but there were some simple issues that they could have remedied without much expense if they had only listened." (space for washer/dryer too small)

"I wish there were full basements, not just half basements with crawl space."

We all have different ideas about the features that make a house or an apartment desirable, yet there is remarkable consensus on the essential elements that make a place liveable. While some people prefer large bedrooms and others enjoy a large open kitchen or family room, everyone agrees that generously sized rooms are better than small ones, that sunny rooms are more appealing than gloomy ones, that a room with cross-ventilation is more comfortable than one with only a single wall for windows.

In the design of the individual unit, common sense is often a good barometer. For isn't it common sense to expect that one's home would include large, sunny rooms, cross-ventilation, adequate storage, visual privacy, access to private outdoor space, and efficient circulation?



32 An annotated plan describing the efficiency of the layout, by Zeisel, Welch and Demos.



33 A traditional, "no nonsense," but very functional and adaptable triple decker unit plan.

13. Assure sunlight in each residence and daylight in each room by the proper orientation of the building and the use of window arrangements, bay windows, and skylights.

"I'm going to put a window in my kitchen to look out the back -- there are pheasants in our backyard!"

Windows let light and air enter a house, and that allows the residents to observe the world outside. It is an element of both function and delight. The importance of window arrangement and location can not be overestimated.

Part of what distinguishes older buildings is how carefully their windows have been placed. The windows vary in size according to room and orientation. Their detailing sets them delicately in the face of the building. Their function does not preclude their use as decoration.

By comparison, many housing projects have uniform, seemingly perfunctory window openings, lacking grace or charm. This is unnecessary given the extremely wide range of readily available, manufactured window types, which can easily be used to help establish the individuality of a residence, to heighten the character of a building and, of course, to provide proper light and protect privacy.

Summer and winter sunlight determine the best placement of buildings and windows. The orientation of a building dictates its heating and cooling requirements. Well-considered siting, construction, and solar-influenced detailing can make residences more liveable and more efficient to heat and cool.

Artists crave the shadowless even light of a northern exposure, but in Boston's climate a northern exposure means a chilly room. South-facing rooms by contrast, will get direct sun most of the day and will be cheaper to heat, if warm in the summer. Different surfaces reflect different amounts of light and consequently result in different indoor temperatures. Black top, brick, water, and grass also reflect very different amounts of light.

Undesirable heat gain in the summer needs to be addressed. Deciduous trees (the ones that drop their leaves in winter) provide an ideal solution to this problem, shading buildings during the summer months and letting the sun through in winter months. Our own Boston Ivy growing on the face of a building provides another solution to this problem, shading in the summer and shedding its leaves in the winter.



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14. Provide every unit with a private outdoor space immediately accessible from the unit.

"I don't feel that I have much private space -- there is no landscaping, fences, or anything which would make me feel that it is my own."

"I wish there were fences letting us know who owns what."

Extending one's domain to capture a bit of the outdoors is very important to a sense of home. Yards, decks, stoops, porches, display gardens, terraces, and verandas all serve this purpose. Whatever the space, it should seem a natural extension of the interior, so that one can move from one to the other freely and easily. Gardens or terraces "around the corner" or "down the street" are rarely convenient and inevitably under-used, unless they are designed for very specific purposes such as that of a victory garden.

While outdoor space is extremely desirable, unsheltered or undefined outdoor areas are frequently inhospitable. In a climate such as Boston's, it makes sense to cover a portion of the private outdoor space with a roof, a canopy, or a trellis. Particularly in multi-family housing environments, outdoor space assigned to individual units should be carefully designed and screened for privacy.

The issue of privacy is particularly important at the ground-level units. These need special protection from the physical and visual intrusion of passers-by along the street, or of neighbors on their way to their own units. In multi-story buildings, consider how to screen the private spaces of those below from those above them.



38 A front stoop becomes an extension of the house's useable living space.



39 An extension of the private domain and a demarkation of front entry.

15. Remember this is someone's home, so elaborate on details and features whenever possible.

"The buildings look cheap-- they didn't use quality materials or put any details into the houses." (abuttor)

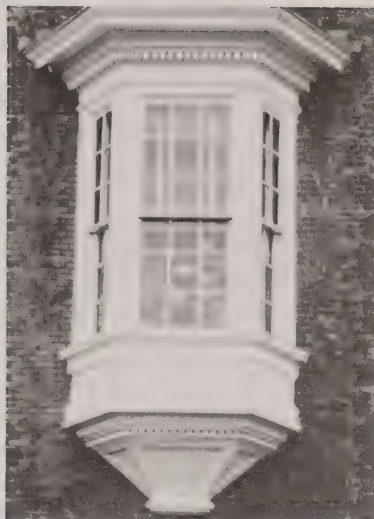
"I think the porches are terrific-- they are just wide enough to sit out on and probably not too expensive."

A comfortable home is enhanced by aesthetic and practical amenities. In the practical realm, include important features such as laundry facilities, ample storage, covered parking, outdoor spigots, garbage disposals, play areas and equipment. These features must be considered in the site plan as well as for each unit. Imagine moving into the development yourself and looking for the amenities or conveniences that you would expect.

For aesthetic considerations, we are lucky to be able to study a variety of successful building types indigenous to Boston. Much of the interest in the older houses of Boston comes from the fact that even modest older buildings contain many features and details that are conspicuously missing from recent housing. Detail, whimsical or serious, makes a house unique and therefore more of a home. Like a garden, architectural elaboration should be expected as a right rather than be considered a luxury. We must all promote development and construction that fosters quality and delight rather than expediency or meanness.



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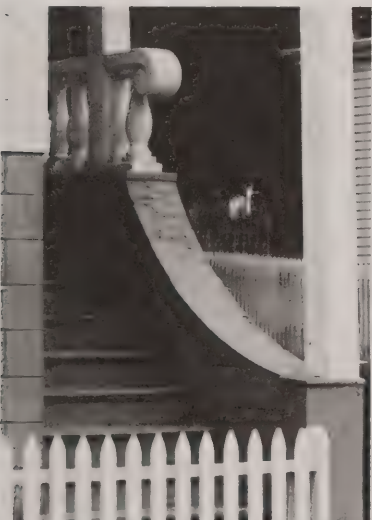
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